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EXPOSITORY STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

XI. RUTH AND SAMUEL

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RUTH'S WISE CHOICE: RUTH 1:14-22¹

I. CRITICAL

No hint is given in the Book of Ruth of its author, and its date of composition has to be inferred from very general evidence. The Hebrew is classic and the linguistic peculiarities are so closely allied to those of certain portions in Samuel that many conjecture that the story was cast in its present mold in the exilic period, somewhere about 500 B. C. On the other hand, many find for it a later date. Its Aramaicisms, together with its theological coloring, have seemed sufficient reason to conclude that it was a polemic which took literary form in the trying days of Nehemiah and Ezra, and was a direct challenge to their exclusive-marriage régime (Ezra 9:1, 2; Neh. 10:28). No doubt, even if it were written earlier, it would be a telling argument against the Spartan principles of those two puritan reformers, and embodying, as it does, a prominent phase of the national history, it would give much comfort to those whom the great scribe found guilty of matrimonial alliance with foreigners. But aside from what theological part it may have played in the drama of history, it is a delightful pastoral idyl, which, because of its universal elements, will bear rehearsal in every age. And in its breadth of sympathy, which ignores tribal boundary lines, it is anticipatory of the Spirit of the Master who, by the side of the well, held converse with the woman of Samaria.

II. EXPOSITION

The book gives a delightful narrative of early times in Israel, throwing a flood of light on conditions and customs. "The days of the Judges" (1:1) is the time in which the events took place. It was the period of transition from nomadic to agricultural life. As yet the restrictions and refinements of civilization were few. The life was simple and wholesome. Harvesting was carried on with primitive implements. Men and maidens worked cheerfully together in the fields. The master was acquainted with

¹ International Sunday-School Lesson for December 8, 1907.

and kindly interested in all his servants and followers. He detects the stranger and inquires after her. All join in the plain yet abundant meal, and are much like a well-ordered family in which the master is but the patriarch, with kindly concern and loving benediction for all the household. The hospitality of the open-hearted nomad has become the agricultural courtesy of gleaning. The hearty merriment of the threshing-floor pertains to that state in life, which, ignorant of a surfeit of riches, rejoices in a wholesome sufficiency. The rights and obligations of the kinsman, the judgment delivered in the gate before the Elders, the removal of the shoe in token of waiving of personal privilege and responsibility, all speak eloquently of tribal customs which became largely a matter of history when Israel emerged into nationhood.

From this story there has been selected for our lesson a passage of rare beauty and special religious significance. There can scarcely be any condemnation suggested in that Orpha remained with her own people. The logic of her mother-in-law was to her conclusive, and the ties with her own kindred were honorable and not to be despised. So her home-returning in no wise savors of unworthiness.

On the other hand, the story has enshrined in the world's memory the name and affection of Ruth. Ruth and Naomi have become names of almost equal significance to those of David and Jonathan. Ruth's answer to her mother (vss. 16, 17) is a classic in the language. Its first element is a tender and undying affection for the older woman. In fact, this love is the sole motive assigned for her cleaving to Naomi. It is such as to brook no separation from the object of its choice and will unflinchingly bear whatever may be the pain of the consequences. Kinsmen, land, and old religion are left behind, and, prompted by this undying attachment, she willingly faces a new land with strange people and new religious customs. In those days tribal conditions were not sufficiently outgrown for the mass of the people to make religion a matter of individual choice. Moab worshiped Chemosh as the tribal deity, while Jehovah was the god of Israel. Thus to conform to the religious customs of the people would be only the natural thing for one coming into the bounds of Judah. Ruth no doubt had already learned much about Jehovah-worship from Naomi, and that at this time it may in many respects have been similar to that of her own people, is suggested by the close racial connection between Israel and Moab, as well as the near proximity of their territory and their constant intercourse one with the other. Her determination, however, as in many similar cases, brought with it more than she could have possibly realized. It brought her into touch with a religion, which already

was in germ, and ultimately became far different from that of her forefathers. Already the leaven of the ethical element, which distinguished the religion of Jehovah from that of its neighbors, was at work. And she and her descendants became worshipers of the true and living God. And again through her marriage, which seemed a far call to the lone widow, she became the ancestress of the great king of Israel and thus the lineage of the Messiah runs back to this faithful Moabitess maiden.

III. APPLICATION

1. *Home associations throw their influences over the whole life.* Not only the physical, mental, and social receive their impress there but the religious as well. The influence of Naomi reaches its sublimest point when we contemplate the result of Ruth's choice in its religious aspect.

2. *A single choice is often followed by the most far-reaching consequences.* One decision may seem insignificant in the myriad complexities of life, yet such may be the parting of the ways. There is usually more resulting from a choice than appears on the face of it.

3. *The noblest affections and deepest convictions, when followed, will always lead to richer experiences and clearer views of truth.* Ruth was not disobedient to the call of her truest self, and she was rewarded by an enviable place among "the elect people." The lines,

To thine own self be true,
And it must follow as the night the day
Thou can'st not then be false to any man,

tell but half the truth. Surely such a principle, taken in its highest sense, not only hinders the false, but promotes the good, and ultimately leads us, like Ruth, into the very family of God.

THE BOY SAMUEL: I SAM. 3:1-21²

I. CRITICAL

Originally I Samuel, II Samuel, I Kings, and II Kings constituted one book, in the Septuagint called "Books of Kingdoms," and in the Hebrew were rightly placed among the prophets. They are essentially prophetic. They have the religious view-point of these men and are interested in the historical only as it illustrates their principles. Hence we find expanded sermons (cf. I Sam. 2:27-36; 12:1-18; etc.), religious functions and institutions looming up large, and prophetic characters as Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha receiving much attention while purely political movements and important kings receive but passing notice.

² International Sunday-School Lesson for December 15, 1907.

The book in which the two concluding lessons of the year are found takes its name from the chief actor. The author is unknown. In fact, somewhat the same process of editing took place as in the Hexateuch, though with fewer component parts and evidently with less care. Some of the chief features of the J and E documents, respectively, are to be detected. Perhaps it is more than mere conjecture, however, that conceives that behind these documents there lie earlier writings. There may have been memoirs of these times, left either by the chief actors or by contemporaries, which formed the basis of the later literature. In I Sam. 10:25 it is reported that our prophet wrote the manner of the kingdom in a book, and we would not be surprised if the reference to the chronicles of Samuel the seer in I Chron. 29:29 carried a tradition based on fact. The great prophet may have left memoirs of the facts of his day.

Our lesson, I Sam. 3:1-21, has its affinities chiefly with the Ephraimitic document. This is seen especially in the dream and the double call. It is further colored by eighth-century prophetic ideas. Thus the prophet is conceived of as the vice-gerent of God. A textual corruption admittedly due to scribal prejudice is found in vs. 13. The Greek rendering most likely contains the original. Instead of "his sons did bring a curse upon themselves," read "his sons were blaspheming God."

II. EXPOSITORY

Samuel is one of the few cases in Old Testament history, in the account of whose birth tradition introduces the miraculous element. Of most characters, Jacob, Moses, and Samuel forming the chief exceptions, little or nothing is known of their early days. We find that those cases, of whom it is recorded that there was a supernatural intervention in the course of nature, generally belonged to the earliest days of history. The simple story of birth and dedication, which belongs to the latest strand of the narrative, is the fitting introduction to a life, which in the eyes of tradition loomed up, not only as a bridge between the chaotic days of the judges and the more united front of the kings, but even as the crowner of kings and the overthrower of dynasties. He is portrayed as from his earliest days in line with the duties and dignities of his high office. Hence not only do we find him at an early age ministering before Jehovah, but while yet merely a child (Jewish tradition says twelve years of age), he receives a revelation from Jehovah and is thus called to be a prophet.

In the ordinary course of the lad's service, which consisted chiefly in care for the sacred vessels, he received the revelation. The word of Jehovah was rare in those days, that is, in comparison with later days—prophets

were few. The story is naïvely told. Eli, whose senses are failing through age, is lying in a tent or sleeping-apartment near by. It is some time before dawn, perhaps in the dimness of the morning, for the night lamp is not extinguished (cf. Exod. 27:10, 21; 30:7, 8; where a light is required to be kept going all night). Samuel is asleep, scarcely in the temple, but in some sleeping-place in close proximity to the sacred place and belonging to the general scheme of sanctuary structures. A voice clear and distinct breaks on his slumbering ear. Immediately responsive, he runs to Eli, who after the third visitation divines the source of the call and instructs his neophyte. Then Jehovah declares the certainty of the calamity already spoken against Eli and his house (I Sam. 2:27-35), because of the iniquity of his sons (I Sam. 2:12-17), which he but lightly rebuked (I Sam. 2:23-25) and which was unpardonable (I Sam. 3:14). Eli humbly acquiesces in the coming punishment when the boy in the morning, under constraint, tells the whole story. From this time on our prophet becomes established as priestly officer at Shiloh and his reputation as a receiver of oracles spreads throughout the land.

III. APPLICATION

The lesson and its content teem with possible application for modern life. Eli, Hophni and Phineas, and Samuel are peculiarly human and each in his own way presents a lesson to us today.

1. *Eli* is the good man who failed in his parental duties and was held accountable. He was not lacking in the gift of exhortation, but his voice was not freighted with authority. Gentle admonition is scarcely the "training" of which the sage speaks in the well-worn adage, Train up a child in the way he should go, etc. Yet, in other respects, as religious ministry and cheerful submission to the divine will, his life is most exemplary.

2. *Hophni and Phineas* are prototypes of the professional religionist, who has no personal experience of God. The goodness of the father does not insure similar virtue in the children, nor is high religious office a guarantee for high ideals. Human frailty and passion may germinate and flourish even beneath the priestly garb. And further, the result of evil is never confined to its author. Friends, neighbors, and relations all fall under the darkness of its shadow.

3. *Samuel*, the young prophet, has for us, however, the weightiest example. Youthfulness is no barrier to goodness. Careful attendance on the minor matters of service may be in the direct pathway to larger offices. The responsive heart and the open ear are always needed to

receive new revelation. Unwelcome messages must sometimes be spoken by the man of God. The true and fearless prophet cannot fail in influencing the nation at large.

SAMUEL THE UPRIGHT JUDGE: I SAM. 7:1-13³

I. CRITICAL

Verse 1 of the lesson belongs to the preceding chapter, as it is a continuation of that early Judean narrative of the fortunes of the ark. The conclusion of that story is nowhere found. The destruction of Shiloh (cf. Jer. 7:14), the removal of the ark, the moving of the priesthood to Nob, and the Philistines' march into the country would naturally fall in place here. But unfortunately it is wanting. Perhaps the unfavorable story was dropped from the tradition by the editor in order to give place to the more appreciated story of Samuel's victory over the Philistines, and his place of high honor in the nation. Vss. 3-17 belong to the latest strata of E. Here Samuel is seen in a new light, that of Judge, and plays a new rôle, that of general. The statements that "the Philistines were subdued and came no more within the border of Israel" (vs. 13), and "the cities which the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron even unto Gath" (vs. 14), scarcely correspond with history as recorded in chaps. 13 and 14 (cf. 13:4). Certain significant features are similar in both stories. The Hebrews are afraid (cf. 7:7 and 13:6, 7); a preparatory sacrifice is made (cf. 7:9 and 13:9); victory is assisted by divine interposition (cf. 7:10 and 14:15); a confused rout of Philistines is vigorously pursued by the Israelites (cf. 7:11 and 14:30). It is true that in the two narratives there is a difference in respect to places and hero, but the similarities as well as the lack of historicity in 7:13, 14, at least raise the question, whether in 7:3-14 we have not the Ephraimitic tradition of a struggle in which their own hero has been glorified, while they have permitted certain of the important actors in the scene to pass unnoticed. Chaps. 13 and 14 would on this theory be the Judean tradition of the same engagement.

II. EXPOSITORY

Putting away foreign gods—the Baalim are evidently referred to (vs. 4), which was the burden of the message of Elijah and the prophets immediately succeeding him—and turning to Jehovah, was the prelude in the writer's mind to the victory over the foe. Jehovah must be thoroughly appeased. A religious assembly was called at Mizpah. A primitive and somewhat obscure ceremony was observed. The pouring-out of water,

³ International Sunday-School Lesson for December 22, 1907.

which in nomadic days was the all-important factor in life, can scarcely be regarded as a gift to deity. It belongs rather to sympathetic magic, in which by imitation of nature, a certain result, rain in this case, may be induced. Similar practices are common among many untutored peoples. Even in later Judaism the pouring of water from the pool of Siloam on the altar, during the feast of tabernacles, was interpreted by the rabbis as a means of securing fertilizing rains the following season. Here the significance is not very certain. Was it a charm which induced the ensuing thunder storm (vs. 10)? However, there is no doubt that it was a sincere effort to enlist the divine sympathy and assistance on their behalf. The fasting is more easily understood. Originally probably, and later, as in all asceticism certainly, fasting was related to a physical conception of holiness. Here, however, it is a sign of sorrow for sin, and is an evidence of humiliation on the part of the people. A verbal confession of guilt is its accompaniment.

The report of this concourse is the signal for the array and march of the Philistine army. Fear spreads in the ranks of Israel. Renewed supplication (vs. 8) and a burnt-offering (vs. 9) secure the desired favor from Jehovah. The engagement takes place and religiously the result is ascribed to the wonder-working of their God (vs. 10). Of the manner of this divine assistance there is no elaboration. May the brief statement indicate the work of natural phenomena, as does a more extended narrative of an earlier battle (cf. Judges 5:4, 5, 20, 21)? The human factor in the battle rallied when they saw the foe in confusion and drove them in utter rout a long distance from the field of conflict. If chaps. 13 and 14 describe the same victory, the flight and pursuit is there given in much more vivid detail (cf. 14:20-23).

A memorial stone was set up at Ebenezer (stone of help), which, though here spoken of as if named to commemorate this victory, is in 4:1 and 5:1 the scene of a much earlier defeat. It is chronicled that this concluded the wars with the old enemy and restored much lost territory (vss. 13 and 14). This was realized only when the strong hand of David held the scepter.

The last two verses of the chapter belong to the following section. Here Samuel is installed as judge. His circuit, his regular tours, and his home are indicated. This dignity and his appointment of his unworthy sons as his successors (8:1) are the introduction to the question of kingship which the historian introduces in 8:4. Samuel is here invested, under an old official title, with that authority which later prophets exercised when they stood before kings and fearlessly denounced the current evil or

boldly advised in the political policy of the nation. His judgeship is the bridge between the old régime and the new. He is honored as the anointer of Saul (I Sam. 10:1; 12:1), the herald of the fall of his dynasty (I Sam. 13:14; 15:23; 28:17), and the anointer of David (I Sam. 16: 1-13). This is emphatic testimony of the very important part which Samuel played in the formative days of Israel, and the very high regard in which he was held by the prophets of later times.

III. APPLICATION

1. *Humbleness of spirit*, here seen in the fasting and confession of sin, is always needed for the tasks which are greatest in the most spiritual sense.

2. *Waiting on God*, or practicing the presence of God, here seen in earnest supplication and burnt-offering, is a daily need, not only for the time when we face the well-equipped foe, but also when there seems a lull in the conflict and strife. This is that which leads to the mount of transfiguration.

3. *Faith in Jehovah*, which is one of the noblest messages of the Old Testament, and is here seen in Samuel, gives an optimism which fears no obstacles.

4. *Victory is always assured* to the people of God. While sometimes the opposition is long lived, as were the Philistines, and for each battle the soldier must be prepared, every milestone may be a memorial on which we write Ebenezer, and finally it may be said, "The Philistines were subdued and came no more within the border of Israel."